

UNCENSORED VIDEOGAMES

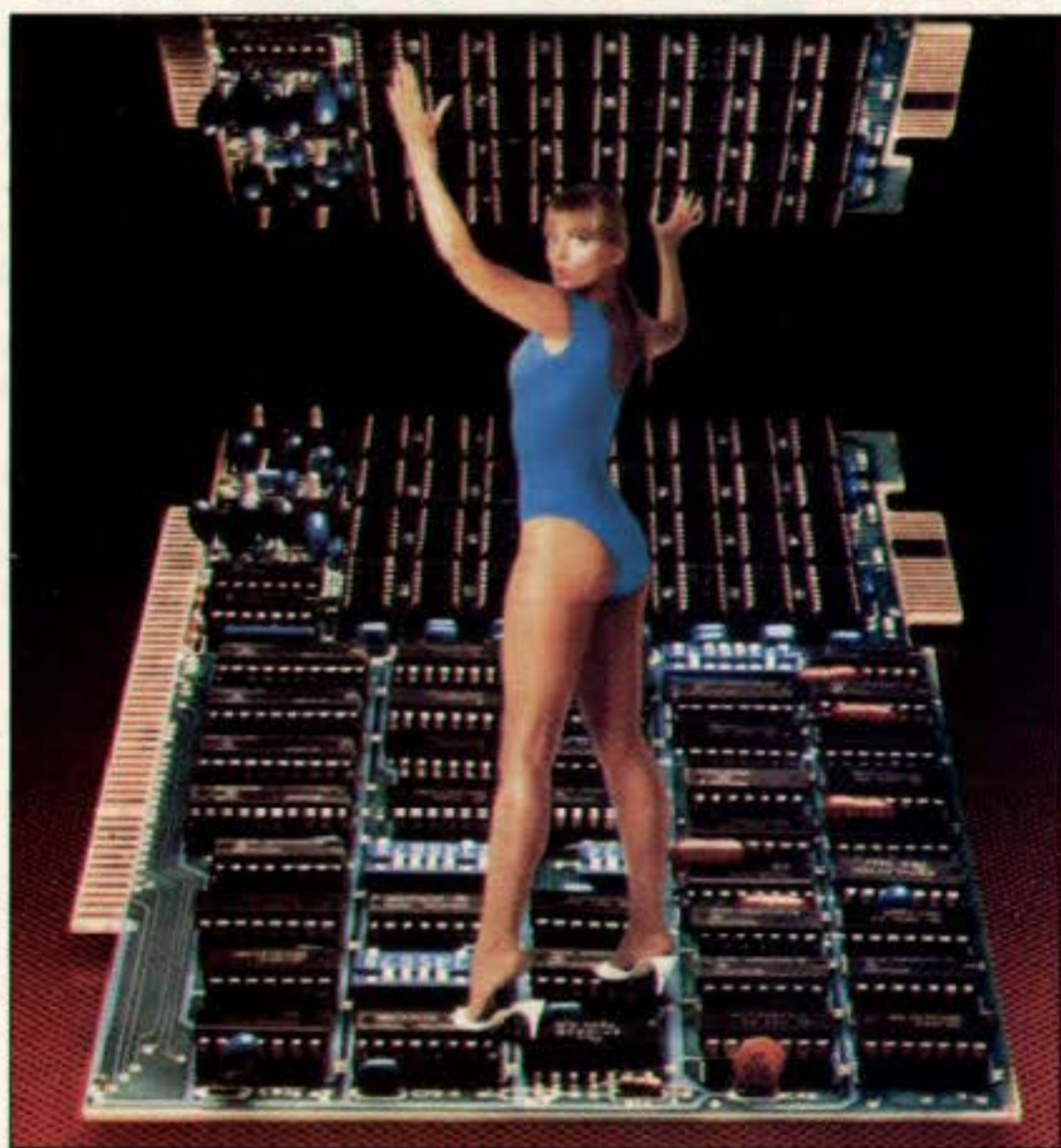


PHOTO: ROSS M. HOKOWITZ

Are Adults Ruining It For The Rest Of Us?

by Tim Moriarty

In a conference room in the New York Hilton in October of 1982, members of the press and interested retailers gathered to preview a new videogame.

Outside the hotel, 250 women and men gathered to protest that activity.

The game was *Custer's Revenge*. It was the first X-Rated, or adult, videogame, and if sex-related electronic games ever had a chance of sliding into the American scene quietly and with minimum

resistance, *Custer's Revenge* scuttled those chances forever.

One of the organizers of the protest was Kristin Reilly, who serves on the steering committee of Women Against Pornography. Members of that organization were joined by those of nationwide chapters of the National Organization of Women and the American Indian Community House.

Speaking of *Custer's Revenge*, Reilly says, "The game features an enactment of a white male, General

Custer, ravishing an Indian woman who is tied to a post. Once there was a lot of furor over the game, the company (American Multiple Industries) denied that it was rape. They claimed that it was mutually consenting visual images, which is really asinine."

MYSTAGUES

Perhaps it was inevitable. There are few aspects of American life that remain untouched by sexual innuendo. In addition to the arts and

communications (and the peripheral products and the selling thereof), there are erotic chocolates and cookies, hood ornaments, watches, cups, glasses, pens, Christmas ornaments, playing cards, board games, and need we say more? If it has a shape, a surface or a function, someone will find a way to eroticize it. The sexual revolution may be over. We live in its wake.

And perhaps it was inevitable in another way: with digitally sanitized violence rampant in videogames, could sex be far behind?

As in films, books, and bowling, the approach is all-important. Sex, introduced in any form, no matter how subtle or sanitized, is bound to offend someone. Many others will, if not accept, tolerate material that is presented with sensitivity and good taste (define *that* and win a million dollars).

Whatever the definition of good taste, American Multiple Industries mangled it with at least two of their first three releases, which were distributed under the label Mystique. In addition to the rape/ravishment theme, *Custer's Revenge* gameplay is as boring as boring can be, consisting of simply running from screen left to screen right.

A second release, *Beat 'Em and Eat 'Em*, features *Kaboom*-style gameplay that grows tedious before the player can reach triple figures. And its scenario, which cannot be described here, is enough to send the most liberal sexual enthusiast staring at his/her shoes in abashment.

The third Mystique game is *Bachelor Party*. In gameplay similar to *Breakout*, a bachelor "hits on" a phalanx of females at a party. The bachelor's technique is to bounce off the walls and to slam into the guests. True to life, the women quickly disappear after he has hit on them.

The protests which followed the Custer game, the many letters that AMI and Atari received, and the resultant lawsuit that Atari filed against AMI for wrongful association of the game with their product (the Atari 2600) (a lawsuit that languishes today because of the slippery nature of the prey)—these factors have made it difficult for game designers who are considering creating games with adult themes.



With lush graphics and suggestive rather than blatant gameplay, Multi-Vision hopes Harem will be a hit.

Alan Roberts, formerly a director of industrial and adult films (*Young Lady Chatterley*), created a game with an adult theme—*X-Man*—through his Game-X firm, and then found the atmosphere among distributors and retailers less than warming. "The response from players has been enthusiastic," says Roberts. "Women and men. We were anticipating terrific business, but it has been hindered as a result of the Mystique line and the bad press that came from it. It was a very negative beginning for the

adult game business. It created a problem on a store level. Certain stores think that because *Custer* was a bad game, all adult games are bad games. That's not true at all. As Atari learned with their *E.T.* game, each game rises and falls on its own merits. It's gameplay.

"We have not had the full support of the major wholesalers in the U.S.," Roberts continues. "They have designed corporate policies in many cases in reaction to the bad publicity of the Mystique games. They have decided that all videogames are naughty."

Eugene Finkei is the president of Multivision Ltd. Once a photographer for *Penthouse*, *Oui*, and many European publications, Finkei has also ventured into the adult theme videogame field and he is experiencing similar difficulties. Like Roberts, he minces no words in describing the Mystique games: "In my opinion the whole thing was designed as a scam. The games must have been designed very hastily. They were crude. Interaction between player and game was minimal. Action was minimal. They're just lousy games. The distributors and the public are wary of the product as a result of AMI's Mystique games."

SIMPLY EIFFEL

To prove that adult games need not be offensive or boring, Finkei and Roberts are working hard to market their games, games they are proud of. To date, the response has been quite good in Europe, not quite so good in the United States.

In Roberts' *X-Man*, the player controls a fellow running a maze and dodging clamping teeth, crabs and scissors. If the player reaches the center of the maze unscathed, the screen changes to a bedroom. There, intimate goals must be achieved before time runs out.

"We are currently working on *The Rescue of Emmanuelle*, based on the famous Emmanuelle character," says Roberts. "It is a male-oriented action game where one has to rescue Emmanuelle, the rewards being that, if you are skillful enough to save her, she is going to thank you, bestow her kindness on you.

"It's a climbing game. It takes place on the Eiffel Tower. The

hardest part in designing the game is that the tower doesn't fit well in the TV screen. We're working on a scrolling system.

"We had hoped that if we had a success with *X-Man* we would design a similar game for women, one that would have concepts that would appeal specifically to women. And many of our people want mixed gameplay, where both male and female play."

The question may well be asked: why go to all this trouble to create a game that is inevitably going to catch flak? Why erotic games? Alan Roberts says, "I love all kinds of games. My favorite is *Demon Attack*. I would love to do games like that. I just felt that there was no way a small company could compete with Atari or Activision or Imagic. They are doing a great job of delivering high quality games to the market.

"Since my experience has been more with the erotic field, it was a natural for me. I don't rule out in the future doing something in the regular field. At the time I thought this was something that was unique and could get us a little piece of the market for ourselves."

Also hoping to carve out a slice of the market and to grow from there is Eugene Finkei. He is the president and founder of Multivision Ltd. and he is the designer of the company's games.

"We create games that will appeal to adults, but not necessarily with sexual themes," says Finkei. "We're not pandering to any weird notions of sex. Our games would be rated R, rather than X.

"*Harem* is a fantasy story game," Finkei relates. "The action happens outside the harem in the garden. The player must penetrate defenses to get into the garden. Various ladies are waiting for him at various points. Once he gets to the ladies, the idea is to match their rhythm with the joystick. If he stays with one lady too long, he gets into trouble.

"*Battle of the Sexes* is played simultaneously by two players. It's very innocent. Each player has surrogate partners scrolling across the screen. Each player must score with as many surrogates as possible while trying to knock out the surrogates of the other partner.

"There are different skill levels and variations: it can be played by two guys with girls scrolling across the screen or by women with men scrolling across the screen. To score, the player directs the figure to bounce together with the surrogate for a fraction of a second. No genitalia. And you don't shoot the other's surrogates, you merely get them out of the way.

"*Heartbreak* is also played by two players simultaneously. Each player has a maze with a surrogate partner waiting in the center. The player who is first to the center of the maze finds his or her heart glowing. The other's heart breaks. If they arrive simultaneously, both hearts glow."

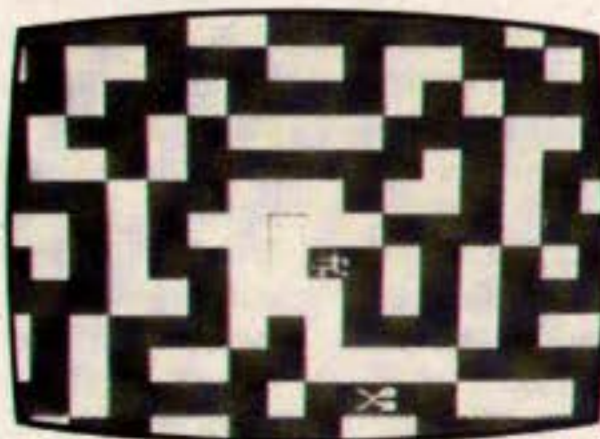
GAME OBJECT

"The objectification of women has found its way onto a whole new medium," laments Kristin Reilly of Women Against Pornography.

Creators of sex-related materials have always been condemned by some on religious grounds; relatively new are charges of corrupt sexual politics. Games such as the ones we're discussing risk the label 'sexist'; they risk the label 'exploitive'; the label 'corruptor of youth'; they are open to charges that they cheapen women and degrade them by reducing them to objects, targets.

Defendant, how do you plead?

"I don't have a definite answer there," admits Alan Roberts. "But it is certainly a concern. I have always had, and I hope I always will have, a good relationship with women. I have a good marriage, a happy marriage. I don't think I've treated women with disrespect, or at least I hope that's not a quality that I have, and I hope my games don't either. A game, like a movie or a book, can only be a reflection of the person who's designing, a statement of



The maze sequence from *X-Man*.

what his or her thoughts are. My thoughts sexually have always been fun and wholesome and healthy. I love beautiful women and sexual themes. I have always treated sexual matters in a humorous way rather than a violent way. I don't know what the answer is because I don't understand it."

But Roberts does understand that you don't knowingly create a product that will not gain acceptance: "A sexist game would not be a success in the home because the woman would not want it to be played while she is around."

Not surprisingly, the game designers claim they have elicited favorable reactions from women on their games. Says Eugene Finkei, "I haven't met any woman who has played the game (*Harem*) who has objected to any part of it. Sexist? I don't think so."

Ditto, says Alan Roberts, "I've seen women playing *X-Man* and really having fun, which surprised me since we really didn't design it for women. But I get a kick when a woman player gets into the door and she gets control of *X-Man*. That to me is the funniest. The game really comes to life at a party. When the man plays it, very often a woman will comment, 'That's just the way you are.' When the woman plays it, she's in there going crazy! 'This is really it, boy, I've finally got control over it!'"

INCITES

Going crazy. Control. Key words, words which open the door to criticism of videogames in general and adult videogames in particular.

Videogames have always come under fire for fostering aggressiveness and violence with the recurrent, wholesale destruction of cities, planets, and galaxies in game after game. Whatever then are we to think of games with sexual pleasure, or a woman, as the goal?

Kristin Reilly comes to the point: "These games are active participatory games. They involve the player seeing the woman, in most cases, as some kind of target for sexual aggression. And because they're active, they take the player closer to what could be real life enactment of any kind of sexual harassment or aggression toward

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SEX

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women or girls. It is one thing to look at films or pictures, but this acting out and seeing women as targets and seeing it as entertainment is just one step closer to seeing a woman and saying something to her that she would consider offensive."

"But", says Eugene Finkei, "a videogame doesn't get you excited. You can only stimulate people with something that is real. Our sex is not graphic. It is symbolic, if anything."

"If pornography is defined as arousing prurient interests," says Alan Roberts, "then I have yet to see anyone who has been aroused by *X-Man* or any other adult game."

Roberts admits that these games require special handling. "They don't fit in with the regular games and they don't fit in with adult movies. They're somewhere in between. They're adult, but not pornographic."

Pornographic or not, can these games incite the impressionable to violence toward women? "Absolutely untrue," insists Roberts. "Taking



FriskyTom, an arcade game from Nichibutsu, bordered on the risqué.

the Mystique game as an extreme example, I cannot believe that if a man saw that on the screen it would incite him to rape an Indian or any kind of woman. I mean, it is just not arousing. You do not get turned on by this.

"On the other hand, there are movies that are arousing. If you don't know how to deal with being turned on like that, I could see how it might lead to something in a negative vein. That could be a

serious problem, but I don't see it as enough reason to outlaw it. You had the Hinckley matter where a movie definitely had an effect on his infatuation with Jodie Foster and his attempt to kill the President. No question but that there was a correlation between them.

"But I don't think we can live our lives in fear and suppress everything that might incite someone to do something. We would have no books to read or shows to watch. There is a fine line here concerning who we create art for and how."

The arguments are familiar, conclusions are subjective, and the future of adult videogames is unclear. At the moment, Mystique games are still carried by some stores while the newer games struggle to see the light of day.

Although some will claim that uncensored videogames are dangerous, it is possible that some benefit will be realized from the controversy other than enjoyment in the home or money changing hands. Perhaps we will learn more about how media affects behavior as well as the nature (and the unforeseen consequences) of interaction

SHELL GAME

Custer's Revenge and two other X-rated videogames were created and manufactured by American Multiple Industries. AMI had contracts to use the Mystique label on the three games.

When the furor began over the content of *Custer's Revenge*—when distributors began to refuse to han-

dle it, when store owners began to return it, and when Atari leveled a lawsuit at AMI—the manufacturing, sales and distribution rights to the three games were briefly obtained by a company called Game Source.

But VCI has learned, through investigations by various diligent women's groups, that the rights to the games now fall under the jurisdiction of a New York company

called Playaround, which was recently formed by Joel Martin who was the partner of Stewart Kesten, the former president of AMI.

A spokesman for Playaround refused to discuss the company's history or its connection to AMI, saying that a discussion of the matter would serve no purpose. He did add that Playaround was developing ten new uncensored games.

